BETWEEN THE SPECIES

Review of *The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue*

Paola Cavalieri

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This slim volume, officially authored by Italian philosopher Paola Cavalieri, is actually a discussion among Cavalieri and four others: Cary Wolfe, Harlan Miller, Matthew Calarco, and John (J. M.) Coetzee. Cavalieri sets the agenda with a piece in dialogue form, "The Death of the Animal: A Dialogue on Perfectionism." As Peter Singer points out in his Foreword, in addition to the issue of perfectionism, the book is concerned with the respective merits of analytic and continental approaches to animal ethics, and with whether reasoned argument plays the central role in ethical matters that many philosophers would like to believe. The exchanges among the participants are sharp and provocative.

Cavalieri rejects perfectionism: the idea of a hierarchy in moral status among sentient individuals based on the degree to which they possess certain cognitive skills (most commonly: self-consciousness, rationality, and language). She points out that although we no longer subscribe to perfectionism when it comes to human beings (who are all considered to possess "human rights" by virtue of mere intentionality), we regularly use it to judge the worth of nonhumans, with the abstraction "the animal" designating the bottom of the perfectionist hierarchy. Cavalieri also rejects the idea that we can have some credible way of judging the relative harm that death is to different sorts of individuals, based on their levels of mental complexity. (Given the widespread intuition that death is a greater harm to a normal human than to a dog—see Regan's lifeboat case, for example—it would have been good to have someone in this volume at least play devil's advocate on this one.)

While none of the participants is willing to defend perfectionism, Cavalieri's opening dialogue does unleash a somewhat heated exchange on analytic versus continental approaches to

animal ethics. Marx said, "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Analytic philosophers not only have placed animal ethics on the intellectual agenda, but also have played a major role in the founding and on-going development of the modern animal-liberation movement. With respect to nonhuman animals, is continental philosophy only for interpreting the world in various ways, or can it make a real contribution to changing it? Calarco thinks it possible to adapt the insights of Emmanuel Levinas and others to make such a contribution.

Calarco criticizes as "metaphysical" the attempt by Cavalieri and other analytic philosophers to demarcate the moral community, to decide who's in and what's out. Instead, he advocates an "agnostic" ethics of universal consideration, open to the possibility that "anything might take on a face." Cavalieri replies that mere moral considerability is not the issue here; rather, it is who is entitled to basic equality of treatment. If nonhuman animals are to be included with humans in the community of equals, then even for an ethics of universal consideration there must be a criterion for access to equality.

The reliance of Cavalieri (and many other animal advocates) on the concept of rights comes under fire from Wolfe and Calarco. Harlan Miller responds that it doesn't matter whether we regard rights as natural or artificial: reflection on our moral attitudes toward members of the human family, combined with logical consistency, calls for expansion of the moral community, and—here Miller makes a point made more than a century ago by Henry Salt—if humans have moral rights, then many animals do too. I would add that evolution has hard-wired us with moral sensibility; we need not demand insight into some absolute moral realm to know what is right and wrong for us,

and how we ought to treat others who are subjects of their own lives.

The contributions of novelist Coetzee are brief but pointed. He doubts that reason has played the key role in changing the attitudes to animals of the book's participants. Rather, each is likely to have undergone a conversion experience involving a Levinas-like recognition of the existential autonomy of the Other, for which backing was then sought in the writings of thinkers and philosophers. Miller demurs, saying his conversion was a purely intellectual matter of being convinced by the arguments of Singer and others.

Philosophers may hope to convince the public by force of argument, but Coetzee reminds us that much of that public values a life of reason less than a life of passion and appetite ("brawling and guzzling and fucking"). There is a joke that asks: How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Only one, but the light bulb has to want to change. It seems to me that reason can, and often does, play a crucial role in changing a person's mind about animals—but only if the person is ready to change. In that case, especially for those more intellectually inclined, reason can flip the switch that makes the light go on. Despite her work with chimpanzees, for many years Jane Goodall continued to eat meat; then she read Singer's *Animal Liberation*, the light went on, and she stopped eating meat. The interesting question is what brings a person to the point where they are ready to change, brings them to the verge of saying, "Yes, this is what I should do; this is what I want." That lengthy prologue is complex, and one in which reason is typically subordinate to the emotions. The young child who feels horror on learning where her meat comes from is reasoning, but the driving force is sympathy, without which reason is unlikely to gain

traction. (In the case of the child, this particular sympathy is likely soon to be suppressed or diverted, perhaps to resurface later in life.)

Philosophy has its place in the dialectic of reason and passion. Those interested in animal ethics have reason to read *The Death of the Animal*.